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Wednesday, October 29, 2008

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Ypsilanti woman sentenced to prison for trying to suffocate infant daughter in hospital

Posted by Khalil Hachem | The Ann Arbor News October 28, 2008 17:14PM

An Ypsilanti woman was sentenced Tuesday to 42 months in prison for trying to suffocate her 2-month-old daughter while the infant was being treated at [C.S. Mott Children's Hospital](#) in Ann Arbor in June.

April Palmer, 21, told the court that she loves both of her children, and she is struggling every day to understand the incident. She asked the judge to grant her probation under the supervision of the court instead of going to prison.

"I'm sorry for what I did," she said. "I need help."

But Washtenaw Count Circuit Judge Donald Shelton was not persuaded. He said it is difficult to comprehend why would Palmer try to murder her own child.

Palmer's attorney, Mark Hugger, asked Shelton to consider Palmer's past of being abused as a child, facing a variety of financial and emotional difficulties and living with an abusive boyfriend. He also said that probation under the court's supervision and her family's support would be more effective in getting Palmer the help she needed.

Shelton said he agreed Palmer needed help but said she still presents a danger to her children. "I hope you will get treatment," he said.

Hugger said after the hearing that Palmer's family knew prison was a possibility and they are pleased that Shelton gave her the minimum sentence.

The 6-month-old child and her 16-month-old sister are in the custody of their grandmother and they are doing well, Hugger said.

In June, the child, who was born premature, was being treated at Mott for a respiratory ailment. Hugger said Palmer confessed that she was trying to suffocate her baby with a pillow at the hospital, and when the baby cried, she stopped. She was arrested by U-M police and pleaded guilty to assault with intent to murder her 6-week-old daughter.

RELATED STORIES

- [Young mother accused of trying to suffocate baby at University of Michigan hospital](#)

Hugger said the child was not harmed. Palmer told the court in her plea that she was not sorry that she got caught and arrested, an act that she said saved her child's life and hers.

Palmer, shackled and clad in a green jail uniform, received her sentence with teary eyes and was led to prison. She has already served 143 days of her sentence.

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October 29, 2008

Parents won't face child abandonment charges after toddler found on street

Kevin Grasha and Matthew Miller
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The young parents of a 2-year-old girl found Monday wandering on a Lansing street could have their parental rights taken away, but will not face criminal child abandonment charges.

Carl Freeny, 22, and Saleta Chang, 21, both of Lansing, learned Tuesday that their daughter would be temporarily placed with the state Department of Human Services. It is possible that a relative will be approved by DHS to care for the child.

Construction workers found the girl at about 3:30 p.m. in a lane of traffic on East Kalamazoo Street, not far from Freeny and Chang's apartment in the 400 block of Lathrop Street. They live in a house that has been divided into several apartments.

"It is contrary to the welfare of the child to remain in the home," intake referee Kia Loggins said at a hearing in Ingham County family court. Loggins said the girl had been left unsupervised.

Police said the couple left the child while they ran errands, and that she somehow got out of the apartment and wandered down the street. Neither Freeny or Chang explained why they left the girl home alone.

They declined to comment after the hearing.

"My clients understand a mistake was made," said attorney Brian Richards, who is representing Freeny and Chang.

Richards requested services - such as psychological evaluations and parenting classes - that his clients could complete in order to have their daughter returned to them. They will be allowed supervised visitation.

No intent found

Ingham County Prosecutor Stuart Dunnings III said the goal in most neglect cases, if it appears attainable, is to reunite the family.

Dunnings said Freeny and Chang will not face any criminal child abandonment charges. The law requires him to prove that there was "intent to injure or wholly abandon the child," Dunnings said.

"That's not the case here," he said, adding: "We're proceeding in family court because I believe there's a situation that certainly needs to be reviewed."

The state Department of Human Services reported nearly 30,000 confirmed cases of child abuse or neglect in Michigan last year, according to spokesman Edward Woods III.

That's more than 1 percent of all children under 18 statewide.

Released on bond

Freeny and Chang were charged Tuesday with obstruction of justice, police said, but authorities would not say exactly how the parents obstructed justice during the investigation.

They were released on bond Tuesday.

Roberta Schleicher of Child Protective Services said during the hearing that police could not locate either parent immediately following the discovery of the child.

That is why a judge signed an emergency removal order, she said. A local child care agency kept the girl overnight.

Photo circulated

Police took the child to the department's North Precinct, where she was photographed.

Police said they circulated her picture and located her parents at 5:45 p.m. within 10 blocks of the intersection.

Loggins, who did not address guilt or innocence, determined there was probable cause to authorize further court hearings.

The next hearing in family court is scheduled for Nov. 13.



Wednesday, Oct 29, 2008

Posted on Tue, Oct. 28, 2008

Another teenage girl abandoned at Omaha hospital

By JOSH FUNK

OMAHA, Neb.

A 15-year-old girl was abandoned Tuesday night at an Omaha hospital, bringing to 22 the number of children left under the state's unique safe-haven law since it took effect in July.

In a statement issued by the Department of Health and Human Services, Children and Family Services division director Todd Landry says there is every indication the girl is from Nebraska.

She was left at Immanuel Medical Center in Omaha.

State officials declined to answer any other questions about the case until Wednesday when more information could be gathered.

The latest case follows the abandonment of another 15-year-old girl on Monday. Landry said that girl, who was left at Creighton University Medical Center, was from Douglas County.

Authorities continue to investigate that case. The girl, meanwhile, has been placed in a residential shelter, Landry said.

Nebraska's safe-haven law is the only one in the country that lets anyone leave a child as old as 18 at a state-licensed hospital without fear of prosecution for the abandonment.

The law took effect in July, but all of the abandonments have occurred over the past two months. The youngest child abandoned was only a year old; 12 of the 22 were teenagers.

The children have included a child from Iowa, one from Michigan and one from Georgia. The children from Iowa and Michigan have been returned to their states, but the 12-year-old boy from Smyrna, Ga., was just driven up by his mother and left on Saturday.

Lancaster County officials said Tuesday afternoon the Georgia boy will be turned over to a Cobb County, Ga., child protective worker on Wednesday to return to his home state and a Wednesday afternoon court hearing. The boy will remain in Georgia custody at least until a judge decides who should take care of him.

Most states let parents and guardians drop off children who are up to a month old at hospitals or other safe institutions.

Nebraska's law was intended to protect infants, but it was written to include the word "child," which wasn't defined in the law.

Most of Nebraska's 49 lawmakers have agreed to amend the law, so it applies only to infants up to 3 days old. But they'll likely have to wait until the Legislature reconvenes January to act because Gov. Dave Heineman has resisted calls for a special session.

Nebraska officials have stressed that the safe-haven law should be used for children in immediate danger only.

State officials have said parents and caregivers contemplating using the law need to understand there is no guarantee a child could be returned to them if they change their minds. The placement may involve the courts, and the process of regaining custody may prove difficult.

Officials have encouraged parents to seek other resources before resorting to abandonment. They've urged desperate parents to ask for help from family, faith-based groups and other community services before abandoning their children at hospitals.

Associated Press Writer Jean Ortiz in Omaha contributed to this report.

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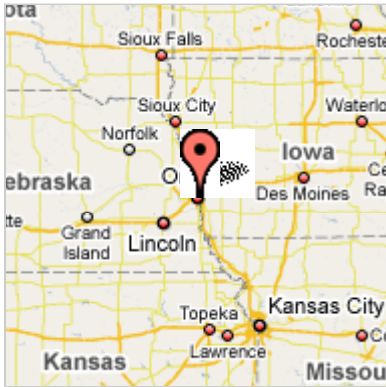
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22nd child abandoned at Neb. hospital under law

10 hours ago

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A 15-year-old girl was abandoned by her father Tuesday night at an Omaha hospital, bringing to 22 the number of children left under the state's unique safe-haven law since it took effect in July.

The girl left Tuesday at Omaha's Immanuel Medical Center is a state resident, said Children and Family Services division director Todd Landry in a statement.

State officials declined to answer questions about the case until Wednesday, when more information could be gathered.

On Monday evening, a 15-year-old girl from Nebraska was left at Creighton University Medical Center. She has been placed in a residential shelter while authorities continue to investigate her case, Landry said.

Nebraska's safe-haven law, which took effect in July, is the only one in the country that lets caregivers leave children as old as 18 at a state-licensed hospital without fear of prosecution. The youngest child abandoned so far was only a year old; 12 of the 22 were teenagers. Three children were from other states, including Iowa, Michigan and Georgia.

Lancaster County officials said Tuesday that the boy from Georgia will be turned over to a child protective worker in Cobb County, Ga., to return to his home state and to attend a court hearing Wednesday. The boy will remain in Georgia custody at least until a judge decides who should take care of him.

Nebraska's law was intended to protect infants, but it did not define "child" in its wording. Most state lawmakers have agreed to amend the law when the Legislature reconvenes in January so that it applies only to infants up to 3 days old.

Associated Press Writer Jean Ortiz in Omaha contributed to this report.

On the Net:

- DHHS' safe-haven page:
http://www.hhs.state.ne.us/Children_Family_Services/SafeHaven



October 29, 2008

New institute to focus on helping kids, caseworkers

BY ROBIN ERB
FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

Gary Anderson remembers those middle-of-the-night runs to the emergency room, trips to the police station, and breaking families apart to keep children safe -- experiences he called "rewarding, meaningful and horrifying."

Now, the former child protective services caseworker is part of the new National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, a federally funded agency charged with reducing caseworker burnout, finding the best ways to serve children and families, and strengthening systems that are plagued with low morale and high caseloads.

"We need to make sure the frontline workers have the knowledge and skills to keep" children "safe, move them to care, move them back to their homes, and move them to adoption when necessary," said Anderson, now the head of Michigan State University's School of Social Work. "These workers have a lot of things to juggle."

With a \$16.5-million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the institute is a partnership of eight universities and the National Indian Child Welfare Association.

The group not only will support frontline workers and leadership at agencies, but also train middle managers and supervisors -- "the glue that holds both ends together," said Mary McCarthy, director of the Social Work Education Consortium at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

The school will serve as the hub for the institute, and McCarthy is a principal investigator.

MSU will receive nearly \$1 million each year for five years to develop training for staff, she said.

The University of Michigan will receive about \$75,000 a year to evaluate the institute's work and improve "cultural competence" among workers, said Kathleen Faller of U-M's School of Social Work.

Though the institute's work is national in scope, the timing is appropriate for Michigan, she and Anderson said.

And Michigan's Department of Human Services has a relatively new director -- Ismael Ahmed has been on the job for just more than a year.

Additionally, federal and state laws and a recent settlement of a federal lawsuit mean sweeping changes for Michigan's child welfare system.

Contact **ROBIN ERB** at 313-222-2708 or rerb@freepress.com.

MSU plays key role in effort to reform child-welfare work force

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[E-mail Editor](#)

Published: Oct. 29, 2008

EAST LANSING, Mich. — A new national institute co-led by Michigan State University aims to reform the child-welfare work force, which is plagued by high turnover and a coming wave of retirements.

The U.S. Children's Bureau – part of the Department of Health and Human Services – awarded \$16.5 million this month to create the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. The goal: develop a more stable and skilled field of social workers who help abused and neglected children and their families.

Turnover among child-welfare workers can range from 30 percent to 60 percent in any given year, said Gary Anderson, director of MSU's School of Social Work. In addition, he said, an estimated 40 percent of the public child-welfare leaders in Michigan alone are eligible to retire in the next five years.

"The federal government has basically said there is a crisis and they have to find a way to help states recruit, retain and prepare workers and leaders for the child-welfare system," said Anderson, lead investigator for MSU in the institute.

The University of Albany, State University of New York will serve as the hub for the institute. In addition to MSU, the other partners are the National Indian Child Welfare Association and the universities of Denver, Fordham, Iowa, Michigan, North Carolina and Southern Maine.

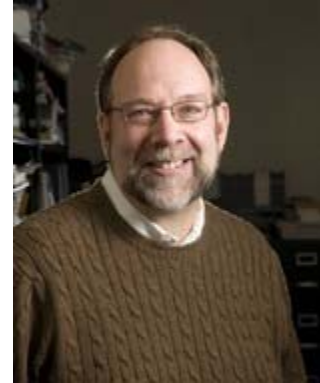
Under the five-year grant, Anderson and other experts from MSU's School of Social Work will run a program to train aspiring social workers across the nation. MSU faculty members will use their expertise to help other universities develop curriculum and programs, communicate with one another and recruit and educate social work students in preparation for leadership roles in child welfare agencies.

In addition, the university partners will evaluate the program's success, Anderson said, "to see whether these students do go into child welfare practice and whether they do a good job."

MSU also will serve on the leadership team that will guide the institute. The ultimate goal, Anderson said, is to create "a stronger, more knowledgeable work force so we can make improvements in helping abused and neglected children."

"No matter how good your ideas and programs are, no matter how strong your organization looks, if you don't have a good work force to implement it, you're done for," he said.

###



Gary Anderson, director of MSU's School of Social Work.

Click on an image to view a larger or high-resolution version.



Everything Michigan

Clare football coach Kelly Luplow happy to be back in the playoffs

Hugh Bernreuter | The Saginaw News, October 28, 2008 11:13 p.m.

In 25 years of coaching, Friday's game means a little bit more than the others for Kelly Luplow.

The Clare football coach is back in the playoffs after a one-year absence. He was on the hiatus, not his team.

The Pioneers reached the playoffs without him last year, making this appearance a bit more special for Luplow.

Clare begins the playoffs at 7 p.m. Friday against Grandville Calvin Christian.

"It's kind of a new feeling again," Luplow said. "It took me a while to get back into it and really feel that green-and-white blood flowing. It feels good, especially after what I went through last year."

Luplow served a one-semester suspension as a coach and teacher last year. A Clare student told Luplow about an alleged sexual offense and asked Luplow not to say anything. Luplow did as the student asked, violating **Michigan's Child Protection Act**, which mandates teachers must report any abuse complaint.

Luplow was suspended, and the Pioneers finished 9-2.

"We have a great coaching staff that kept everything going last year," Luplow said. "We didn't skip a beat. We probably wouldn't have skipped a beat this year, even if I didn't come back.

"You have to put situations like that behind you and carry on. Situations like that make you stronger, I guess."

Although Luplow didn't coach, he was a regular spectator.

"I stayed far away, but I watched," Luplow said. "It was hard, especially when you're ... close to the seniors ..."

Luplow filled his time working as an assistant coach for Alma College.

"I was really busy with Alma, so that took my mind off of it a lot," Luplow said. "Actually, I do miss Alma. I had a great time there. They were great to me. The kids were fantastic."

Luplow jokes that he may have to go back to Alma once people in Clare figure out that the football team was just as good without him.

"My coaches didn't tell me that, but they might have thought it," Luplow said. "We've been coaching together way too long. We've been friends for more than 20 years, and they do a great job."

Assistant coach Doug Haggart led the team in Luplow's absence.

"They make it fun," Luplow said. "Of course, when you have as much success as we've had, it's always fun."

This year Luplow can savor it a little bit more. v

Hugh Bernreuter is assistant sports editor for The Saginaw News. You may reach him at 776-9771.

DHS assistance workers protest caseloads

Posted by [lwmoo](#) October 29, 2008 02:07AM

As many as 40 Muskegon County Department of Human Services union members skipped lunch Tuesday to march in an "informational picket" line outside DHS offices, 2700 Baker, Muskegon Heights.

The workers wanted to bring attention to "unreasonable expectations" caused by increasing caseloads, said Celia Ontiveros, the local representative of UAW Local 6000. The Muskegon County DHS reported the number of cases for the Family Independence Program, Food Assistance, Medical Assistance and Child Day Care was 44,189 in September. Ontiveros was unable to say what the average caseload is per employee.

"But when you don't have enough staff, you have lots of stress," Ontiveros said. "We want to service the public the best we can."

The state of Michigan is currently in a hiring freeze, said the Rev. Jack LaGoe, who chairs the Department of Human Services board.

"We are very sympathetic to (the picketers), very understanding, but we are powerless to add one person to the staff without Lansing's approval," LaGoe said.

Ontiveros said no more picketing is planned. Instead, she said, monthly management-labor meetings will be held.

"Management and workers must unite," she said.

Categories: [Muskegon County](#)

Comments

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News

October 28, 2008

New recovery center enables food bank to sustain, improve operations

By ANN RICHARDS

Hunger is a growing problem for every Michigan community -- rural, suburban or urban, says William Kerr, who has directed the operations of the [Food Bank of Eastern Michigan](#) for the past 14 years.

"Like food banks across the country, we're seeing a rise in the number of people who need help," he said. "Although Michigan's homeless population is not as large as other states, we're seeing greater numbers of people falling into a category we call the 'situational needy.' These are individuals who had a job yesterday and may have one tomorrow -- but don't have one today."

Last year, the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan, which is headquartered in Flint, distributed almost 18 million pounds of food through almost 400 partner agencies in 22 counties, Kerr said. This year's projections -- based on a "gap analysis" developed by food bank staff -- indicates that need is rising.

"It's difficult to determine exactly how many individuals and families we serve each year, but we estimate that in 2007 we fed roughly 350,000 people -- it's closer to a million if you count the number of people we feed on a continuous basis," Kerr said.

The Food Bank of Eastern Michigan is the largest in the state in terms of its distribution area. Named the number one food bank in the nation in 2002 by [Feeding America](#), the food bank has developed a reputation as an innovator, receiving six model program awards over that past several years.

In 2007, to raise the amount and nutritional value of the food it distributed, the agency collaborated with Feeding America to pilot a new food recovery program with Sam's Club. The company, a division of discount merchandiser Wal-Mart Stores, has set a long-term goal of zero waste as part of its efforts to encourage sustainable operations. This initiative includes a store pick-up program to donate surplus product to local food banks.

Initially, the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan averaged three weekly pick-ups, collecting approximately 175 to 200 pounds per stop -- mostly bakery items, Kerr said. Although other types of donated food were available for recovery, the agency lacked the capacity to process, store and distribute bulk quantities of perishables, such as fresh and frozen produce and high-protein items such as meat, fish and cheese. To take full advantage of the store pick-up program, the food bank needed to make some changes.

"When we first were approached about piloting this recovery program, we put a lot of time into creating a five-year plan to restructure our operations," Kerr continued. "We were fortunate that we have a computerized inventory system in place, thanks in part to a [grant from the Mott Foundation](#) several years ago. But we also had to upgrade our fleet of vehicles to handle perishable goods and we had to make sure that the agencies that distribute our food had refrigeration."

The final step, says Kerr, was building the recovery center, a \$1.6 million project that not only included new room-sized freezers and coolers, but additional truck bays, yards of concrete driveway, and complex electrical and plumbing improvements. The Mott Foundation contributed \$800,000 to the project, which was completed and dedicated in September 2008.

"What this ultimately will mean for us -- and for our clients -- is the equivalent of at least two semi-truckloads of high quality protein each month," Kerr said.



"Although Michigan's homeless population is not as large as other states, we're seeing greater numbers of people falling into a category we call the

New recovery center enables food bank to sustain, improve operations

The food recovery program is growing rapidly. In addition to Sam's Club, local Kroger and Wal-Mart Super Stores have agreed to participate. By 2009, Kerr estimates that the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan will be collecting an average of 5,000 pounds of donated food from each of 45 area stores -- about 18 percent of which will be high-quality protein items.

'situational needy.'"

Increased donations of protein- and fiber-rich foods not only will benefit area food pantries and other distribution sites, but improve the nutritional quality of other food bank programs, such as [Kids Cafe](#), which provide hot meals to hungry children at 14 sites across Genesee and Saginaw counties.

"We also served about 117,000 meals through our summer feeding programs this year," said Kerr. "This is the fourth year we've provided breakfasts, lunches and snacks to high-risk children at 55 sites in Genesee and Saginaw County."

An additional 1,200 children -- and often their siblings -- are fed through the food bank's [Backpack Program](#), launched in 2004 to provide "child friendly" items designed to prevent "food insecure" children from becoming hungry over the weekend.

Elderly citizens -- often living on a fixed pension or Social Security -- are served through a "[Senior Box](#)" program, which provides 45 to 50 pounds of supplemental food each month.

Approximately 41 percent of the members of households served by the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan are children under the age of 18, according to [Hunger in America 2006](#), a national study conducted by [Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.](#) Published by Feeding America, formerly known as Second Harvest, a nationwide network of food banks, the study also indicates that 47 percent of households served by the food bank include at least one employed adult.

"Every year, we reflect on our mission and make sure we're correctly aligned to accomplish our goal of feeding the hungry," Kerr said, adding that every dollar donated to the food bank equates to about \$19 worth of food.

"We were the first food bank in the nation to introduce on-line ordering; we've developed a need analysis survey that's being used elsewhere in the country and we've developed a computerized donor base of more than 30,000 individuals who support us. We try to run the food bank like a business because it is, in fact, a huge business that many people have come to depend on."

Innovation is critical, says Kerr, noting that the cost of food and the fuel needed to transport it continues to rise.

"We make a difference for hungry families, and we intend to continue that. We'll keep changing because the food industry keeps changing.



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Governmental units never shy about their stupidity

By Benjamin Gohs Courier Editor

Tuesday, October 28, 2008 8:37 PM EDT

Extra! Extra! There are poor people in Michigan.

According to a press release from the Michigan Department of Human Services, roughly 1.3 million Michiganders get food stamps annually.

Maybe you've heard: 300 Michigan residents including Governor Jennifer Granholm, at least one senator and the president of Grand Valley State University are spending a week attempting to "bring attention to the effects of poverty and increase donations to local food banks and soup kitchens.

Participants in the "Food Stamp Challenge"—my god, they make it sound like a game show—may donate time or money to a food bank or soup kitchen leading up to the Nov. 13 Action 2008 Poverty Summit.

I can't pass a hobo without scrounging a couple bucks to assuage the guilt of having a good job and stable home life, but I have real heartburn with the well-off playing poor.

Human services hasn't released specifics on what this is costing us, but assuming the participants aren't paying cash for the food stamps use, I figure this little publicity stunt misdirects about \$8,800 from people who actually need it.

Those of us who have either grown up poor or hit rough patches as adults know exactly what it's like to go without.

Granholm, according to an early October Associated Press story, said she was buying a lot of macaroni and cheese to feed her family with her \$5.87 per person per day allowance, but she still lives in the governor's mansion with all her creature comforts.

You really want to give these people a taste of hunger and the horrors of poverty?

Let them bathe in cold water every day because the gas has been shut off;

Let them do nothing while their children die of pneumonia because they are afraid to incur hospital bills they could never repay;

Let them send their children to bed without food, knowing tomorrow won't be any better;

Let them live out of their car for a week;

Let them be evicted from their residence because their rent money went to pay the tickets incurred from driving a car with too loud a muffler or a broken windshield—ironically items which they could not fix because they did not have the money to do so.

I know I run the risk of being ousted from the capitalist club. But, growing up as poor as I did, I have a real tough time turning a blind eye to those in need—or making a mockery of their suffering.

Some poverty is self-inflicted. I know that from experience. But, some is not.

And, while I don't suggest tax funded handouts for all, there has to be something we can do to decrease the number of those enduring abject deprivation.

Since we have no problem feeding, clothing and caring medically for murderers, rapists and thieves, perhaps it's time to revisit the idea of the workhouse—I'm thinking of a kinder, gentler place than the grim institutions cited by Dickens.

And, then again, maybe I'm wrong. Perhaps the Food Stamp Challenge will generate the awareness needed to fix the problem.

Next time you see a pauper or a struggling single mother of three, just tell them you are aware of their plight and watch their faces light up with appreciation and gratitude; or, if you really want to help, call your local food banks at 547-6430, 547-4300 or visit the First Congregational Church from 10 a.m. to noon.

Check out www.michigan.gov/poverty for more on the “challenge” or visit www.feedmichigan.org to donate to Harvest Gathering food bank.

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METRO TIMES | 10/29/2008

News Hits

Caught in the middle

BY NEWS HITS STAFF

For **Aziz Alfassa**, the party can only happen *before* his 21st birthday on Dec. 12, and, as the date approaches, he's becoming less hopeful he'll be celebrating and more worried he'll be facing deportation to a hostile homeland or a life in the United States as an illegal.

"I'm scared for my life with what's going on," says the soft-spoken young man. "You want to do the best you can, but how can you move from Point A to Point B if the choice is not in your hands?"

Alfassa is a native of Togo, a small West African country that's been cited by Human Rights Watch for failing to protect against child trafficking. In 2002, Amnesty International criticized Togo's ruling government for human rights violations including violence against members of opposition political parties.

Seven years ago, Alfassa's father, an adviser to a political party opposing the current government, had gone into hiding, and the Togolese government's attention turned to his then-14-year-old son, Aziz. He says police detained and beat him, questioning him about his father's whereabouts. Alfassa was living with relatives and didn't know where his father was. Fearing for his life, he escaped to Grand Rapids with a Ugandan woman whose son-in-law lived there.

When the teen's tourist visa expired, he landed at Freedom House, a Detroit organization that serves asylum seekers. Attorney **David Koelsch** was the legal director there at that time. He shepherded Alfassa's case through the complicated web of immigration law. With his father's location unknown — last they heard he was in a refugee camp in Ghana — and his mother deceased, the Wayne County Juvenile Court became Alfassa's guardian in 2004.

He lived with a foster family and graduated from Holy Redeemer High School with grades good enough to qualify for a scholarship, had he been a citizen. He attended Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn until his money ran out this year. He's worked when he could find a job.

In January 2006, Alfassa filed a petition with U.S. Customs and Immigration Services seeking Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. (See "Caught in the Crossfire: Immigration issues can make college a complicated proposition," Jan. 30, 2008). Undocumented children and teens who are wards of a court because they have been abused, orphaned or abandoned can file for the status, which gives them permanent residency. With his mother dead and his father's whereabouts unknown, Wayne County Circuit Court Judge Leslie Kim Smith made Alfassa a ward of the court writing "it would not be in this child's best interest to return to his home country."

But SIJS requests expire when petitioners are adopted or reach 21, and they have no legal basis to be in the United States, Koelsch says. That doesn't leave Alfassa much time. His three-year-old application has been pending much longer than the usual wait, Koelsch says, although there is no legal deadline for decisions.

"Typically it's about six months. He's way over the outside limit," says Koelsch, who is now the director of the immigration law clinic at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law. "We haven't heard a damn thing."

Calls to the Detroit field office of U.S. Customs and Immigration Services were not returned. According to the Office of Immigration Statistics, 912 SIJS petitions were granted in 2006, up from 679 in 2005.

William Johnson, superintendent of the Michigan Children's Institute, the division of the state Department of Human Services handling foster care, says of the roughly 19,000 children in the state foster care system, just 30 are not U.S. citizens. They have not been screened to see if they are undocumented or would otherwise qualify for SIJS, he says.

"We do routinely check for citizenship," Johnson says. "If we find they are not citizens, I think, unfortunately, we do not routinely go through the steps for applying for SIJS."

The state does not have a policy instructing caseworkers to consider SIJS applications for children and youths, according to Johnson.

"We also would need to identify resources to help with the process of applying for SIJS," he says. "This is really a process that should be handled by immigration attorneys on behalf of kids. It shouldn't be caseworkers doing this. It's a very complicated legal process. ... We do need specialized resources to be able to help these kids."

Alfassa, at least, had help from Koelsch getting his case filed and had an interview with immigration officials more than a year ago. Koelsch continues to write letters every month to keep the case "on the radar." "It's in the pile," he says. But Koelsch can't understand why it's taking officials so long to make a decision. "It's not like he's a threat to national security. He's a kid," he says.

Alfassa, in the meantime, is looking for work. He reads, continues to learn English and lifts weights in the southwest Detroit home where he lives with three other young men.

"I want to get a better job and have a better life, but I can't do none of that if I don't have a green card," he says. "I'm young, but nobody here is listening. I need to know something. It's not fair for me to just stay in the house every day."

He also stays in contact with his two younger half brothers, ages 14 and 15, who live in Grand Rapids with adopted families. They came separately to the United States.

"My brothers are doing good," Alfassa says. "I let them know not to let my stuff get to them. They're still young and they're going to school. That's all they need to worry about now."

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Wednesday, October 29, 2008

Invest more in dropout, health programs for children

Jack Kresnak

We're hearing a lot from the campaign trail and the halls of Congress about the national economy, the possibility of a deep recession and the \$700 billion bailout.

But there is one critical piece missing from this conversation about America's future: Discussion about the young people who make up that future.

We know the jobs of the future will require a work force that is well-educated, creative and innovative. If we don't invest in our kids now, those jobs -- like the hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs that already have evaporated -- will end up overseas in countries whose governments had the foresight to help young children with high-quality preschool programs, older children with challenging school curricula and all children with adequate health care.

Unfortunately, many in Congress and the Bush administration seem to put children last. A recent report by First Focus, a national nonpartisan child advocacy organization, documents that children have lost ground as a priority in the federal budget. Federal spending on children and youth has declined 10 percent in the past five years.

Michigan, which during the last seven years has endured its worst financial crisis in half a century, increasingly relies on federal funds for basic services for children and families. Many critical services for Michigan kids will be subject to deep cuts if federal spending fails to keep up with the increased needs of at-risk children and families.

For example, more than 900,000 Michigan children -- about one-third of the state's population of children -- are in the MICHild of Michigan insurance plan or Medicaid. But 160,000 low-income Michigan children still have no health insurance, despite the fact that two-thirds of them qualify for MICHild or Medicaid.

Last year, Congress voted to expand the State Children's Health Insurance Plan (SCHIP) that would have allowed Michigan to expand coverage to those kids, but President Bush vetoed the bill. SCHIP later was reauthorized at current levels, leaving many Michigan children without access to basic health care. Several studies have shown that kids with chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes have higher school absentee rates, do poorly on tests and are at greater risk of dropping out.

Congress also needs to help Michigan fix its expanding dropout crisis. More than 21,000 Michigan students dropped out of school last year and more than one in six Michigan adults do not have a high school diploma, severely limiting their income potential.

With an average dropout rate of 15 percent, Michigan needs help in the form of federal incentives for multiple pathways to graduation for young people, including creative school/community linkages that would

help dropouts reconnect with educational opportunities.

Take a hard look at what the candidates for president and Congress are saying about investing in children. And, most important, vote with your community's children in mind.

Jack Kresnak is president of Voices for Michigan's Children, an independent advocacy group based in Lansing.

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Wednesday, October 29, 2008

Recognize needs of low-income workers

Place needs of low-income workers at top of agenda

Sharon Parks

We're hearing a lot during this election season about the concern for middle-class workers. But it's low-income working families who are having the hardest time making ends meet. And it is the needs of these families that are truly overlooked.

A new report by the Working Poor Families Project finds that nationwide, more than one in four working families -- 42 million adults and children -- were low-income in 2006, earning too little to meet their basic needs.

Here in Michigan, nearly 300,000 families -- or 26 percent of working families -- are living in low-income households. That means more than 633,000 Michigan children are in homes that earn no more than \$41,228 for a family of four.

Low-income working families often pay a higher percentage of their income for housing and are much less likely to have health insurance.

Low-income workers keep our state's economy running. They are day-care workers and security guards, custodians and health care aides. Adults in low-income working families worked an average of 2,552 hours per year in 2006. That's the equivalent of almost one and a quarter full-time workers.

Why are so many of these workers stuck in low-wage jobs? First, the economy is creating more low-paying jobs. From 2002-2006, the number of jobs paying a poverty-level wage increased 4.7 million nationwide. In Michigan, 19 percent of jobs pay below the poverty level.

Second, to move out into jobs paying a better wage, workers need higher education levels and more job-skills training. Here in Michigan, 22 percent of low-income working families contain one parent without a high school degree and 48 percent have at least one parent without any postsecondary education.

Unfortunately, adult education and skills development policies have not kept pace with the needs of a 21st-century economy. The report finds that combined state and federal resources for these services meet only one-tenth of the need.

In Michigan, the No Worker Left Behind program is working to upgrade skills of workers to match high-demand fields. Unfortunately, it can't keep up with the growing need, and 9,000 unemployed or underemployed workers are on a waiting list. Gov. Jennifer Granholm this year called for \$40 million in state funds to supplement the program but received \$15 million.

Our minimum wage hike to \$7.40 in July is an excellent step, but it is not indexed to inflation. A new state

Earned Income Tax Credit, which goes into effect for the 2008 tax year, will also help the families of low-wage workers.

Those are positive steps, but Michigan has also slashed adult education funding 80 percent since 2003.

It is critical that in Lansing and Washington, the needs of low-income workers get pushed to the top of agenda.

Sharon Parks is president and CEO of the Michigan League for Human Services, a nonprofit advocacy organization for low-income people in Lansing.

Find this article at:

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081029/OPINION01/810290376>

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Michigan Department of Human Services News Release

Contact: Edward Woods III, communications director, (517) 373-7394

DHS Director Ahmed invites Macomb County residents to reduce poverty and promote economic opportunities for all

Oct. 28, 2008

Michigan Department of Human Services Director Ismael Ahmed today formally invited regional human services organizations and residents in Macomb County to join efforts to reduce poverty and maximize economic opportunities for all Michigan citizens by attending the 2008 Voices for Action Poverty Summit in Detroit on Nov. 13.

"Too many families are just one paycheck away from sliding into poverty," Ahmed said. "More than half a million children in this state live in poverty. It's a national issue that affects one in five people including citizens all over Michigan. This poverty reduction summit will bring together leaders from across our state to identify strategies to enhance efforts already underway."

The day-long summit on Nov. 13 kicks off a statewide initiative that builds on Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm's existing efforts to create jobs, strengthen education and expand access to health care, college and job training by using regional teams to focus resources on the area's most pressing issues. Granholm and Martin Luther King III will keynote the summit, which also offers breakout sessions focusing on work and employment, education, health care and housing.

Ahmed joined DHS staff, community residents and regional partners from the communities of Sterling Heights and Warren, including the Macomb/St. Clair Michigan Works! Agency, the Salvation Army, the Macomb County Community Services Agency, and the Mt. Calvary Family and Community Center, to talk about how Michigan families and individuals are finding creative solutions to these challenging economic times.

"Michigan's efforts to reduce poverty and maximize economic opportunity will help achieve the national goal of reducing poverty by 50 percent in the next decade," Ahmed said. "We know that a state effort combined with regional solutions and committed, caring people can make all the difference."

For more information, please visit the DHS Web site at www.michigan.gov/dhs or www.michigan.gov/poverty.